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WHEN CONNECTICUT STOPPED THE HUN

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BATTLE OF SEICHEPREY

APRIL 20-21, 1918

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FROM THE OFFICIAL STORY AS TOLD BY
GEN. CLARENCE R. EDWARDS
COMMANDER OF THE 26th
(YANKEE) DIVISION

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HOW CONNECTICUT STOPPED THE HUN

By AUGUSTIN F. MAHER

This is the official story of the first attack by the Germans in force against American troops. . The old Connecticut National Guard, the 102nd Regiment, met the attack and defeated the Huns.

The story was told to the writer by Gen. Clarence R. Edwards, Commander of the 26th Division, and his Aide, Major John H. Hyatt.

Midnight at Seicheprey on April 20, 1918, in the front line trench called the Sybil trench, were 350 Connecticut boys—seven platoons of the 102nd Regiment with members of the 102nd Machine Gun Battallion. They were sacrifice detachments. The reserves a mile and a quarter behind had orders not to go to their support. The rain was falling in a soft, cold, disheartening, discouraging shower—the kind of rain that spatters 'ere it falls and makes a fog almost impenetrable. All but the sentries were asleep.

To the north stretched No Man's Land—that piece of ground separating the trenches of the Connecticut boys from the wire and the trenches of the Hun.

At 2 o'clock the silence and the gloom were rent by the roar of the German artillery far to the north of No Man's Land. In an instant the space intervening between the Sybil trench and the rear areas behind the town of Seicheprey, where the remainder of the Connecticut Regiment was held in reserve, was an exploding inferno. So accurately placed were the shells of the enemy that scarcely a foot of the mile and a quarter stretch to the second line trench was untouched. High explosive shells, shrapnel and gas shells fell with regular intervals while above the inferno floated the deadly fumes of mustard gas which burned when it touched.

The seven platoons in the Sybil trench were as effectually cut off from all help and all assistance as though the ocean divided them from their reserves. They were awake, for the roar of the German guns had banished sleep.

Out of Richecourt, the nearest town on the northwest held by the Germans, filed eighteen hundred German shock troops, picked from the forces in the north for the purpose of teaching the Yankee his first lesson in the World War. To the northeast, through Remieres Woods,

came fifteen hundred more of the same picked troops. The two forces aimed for the ends of the Sybil trench, and as they came through the German wire they picked up the German forces in the Hun trenches.

The noise of their advance was smothered by the chorus of the guns behind them and the shells far in front of them, while the Connecticut boys in the trenches waited for that which they knew must be coming. The force advancing from Richecourt cut the American wire at the west end of the Sybil trench and crossed beyond the trench, killing or capturing the Americans whom they found. The force advancing from Remieres Wood did the same, and shortly after 4 o'clock the seven platoons of Connecticut guardsmen were surrounded on all sides by over 3,500 German troops.

When the Germans had crossed the American trench they met behind it and then advanced upon the trench. Armed with rifles, bombs, hand grenades, knives and infernal machines, the Huns threw themselves on the boys from Connecticut. The boys from Connecticut had no chance in that black hell, but they fought and they died and they killed until they were all—all but a few—dead or wounded or disarmed or captured.

And that was the beginning of the battle of Seicheprey.

"They intended to crucify us," General Clarence R. Edwards, commander of the 26th Division, said. "They wanted to put the iron into our souls and show us that we couldn't fight in this war in which they had been so long triumphant.

"And I want to say right now, and I want the people of Connecticut to appreciate it, for I am mighty glad that they are interested in their boys, that no regiment in the American Expeditionary Force in France has a better record than the 102nd Regiment, which was made up of the old Connecticut National Guard.

The battle of Seicheprey was the first effort of the Huns to try out the American troops. There had been artillery duels and there had been trench raids in which the American troops had taken part, but up to the 20th of April, the Huns had not had a chance to test the metal of the American fighter.

The 26th Division had been shifted from the Chemin des Dames to the sector of which Seicheprey was a part, a few weeks before. When the Germans had struck the French line at San Quentin on March 21 and had gone through for 18 miles, they had created a situation which demanded the presence on the battered French front of every French soldier available. So the French commanders stripped their lines as much as they dared. They took from the line east of Rheims as many French soldiers as they could and the 26th Division of the United States army was one of the first to be ordered to take the place of the French divisions thus transferred to the north.

The French line of defense even prior to the attack of the Germans on March 21 was thin enough, but when the withdrawals to reinforce the northern armies came, the lines that were left were mere skeletons. The 26th Division was called upon to take and hold a sector which had been thinly held by one and a half French divisions, and the German

bureau of intelligence at that time seemed to be able to find out everything and anything that the French were doing. That perhaps is the reason why they selected Seicheprey as the point of attack, for they knew that the Yankee division which had been placed in there must stretch its men considerably to fill out the gaps caused by the withdrawal from the same sector of one and a half French divisions.

The Americans suspected something, however, because, for nearly four weeks prior to the attack there had been evidence of a concentration of German artillery in front of Seicheprey. But no attack had come and the days and nights had become simply ones of watching and waiting for that which they expected might happen. In the tactical assignments of the troops the French method of defence was adopted. For four years the French had placed in the front line trenches men who were ordered to stay and die or to fight until they were disarmed. Such men knew that in case of an attack they could not expect help from the reserves because the German barrage usually was of such frightful intensity that nothing could live in the space between the sacrifice trench and the reserve positions.

Thus the usual method of attack and defense was that the Germans would attack the first line trench and the first line trench would defend as long as it could. If the attack was in sufficient force the men in the front line trenches were sacrificed and the enemy went on the second line trench, where a greater force was held in reserve and where the resistance would be correspondingly greater.

Thus it was at Seicheprey. On that particular night seven platoons consisting of 50 men each, had been assigned to the Sybil trench—the place of sacrifice. They were taken from different companies of the 102nd and the Machine Gun battalion. In reserve, a mile and a quarter to a mile and a half back and south of the town of Seicheprey were more platoons and further back the remaining platoons of the 102nd Regiment. There are 48 platoons in a regiment.

A few miles to the rear of this supporting line of trenches was Beaumont, the regimental headquarters. Slightly to the southeast was the town of Mandres, also occupied by troops of the 26th Division. And still further to the southeast was Ansanville, the brigade headquarters. Between Seicheprey and Mandres most of the 26th Division artillery was established.

According to General Edwards and Major Hyatt, his aide-de-camp, the night of April 19-20 was as miserable a night as they make in France—and there are miserable nights—weatherwise—in France. It rained all night and with the rain was a fog which could be cut with a knife. It was the night for which the Germans had been waiting. And when the regimental brigade and division headquarters in the early morning heard the roar of the German guns, they suspected the attack was coming although a few days before a five-day artillery fight, in which the 104th Regiment, on the other end of the line had figured, closed without having brought an attack by the infantry. The 104th is a Springfield, Mass., regiment.

This bombardment, however, was far more intense than any previous artillery fire by the enemy on the American line and the whole area back of Seicheprey as far as Mandres and beyond was drenched in a death-dealing shower of shells and gas. Men were killed even to the south of Beaumont.

To the men in the Sybil trench, however, there was nothing to do but wait. And the first they knew that the infantry attack was on was when the Germans swarmed over and into the trenches and the dugouts.

There are not very many men who came back from that trench. The odds were 350 to 3,500 but the Connecticut boys gave all they received and more. It was a fight with bayonets, with clubs and rifles, with fists, with bare hands, until by sheer force of numbers, the Connecticut boys were overwhelmed and those who escaped from the trench were those whom the Germans overlooked in the dark.

The Sybil trench at Seicheprey was a bloody trench when the Germans in their haste to advance upon the second line of trenches, gave the signal to their artillery in the rear to lift the barrage so they could advance upon Seicheprey. Probably not more than 30 men out of the 350 who had been in the trench returned to the American lines. Lieutenant Lockhart of New Haven, who was in command of one of the platoons, came back with eight men. He saluted Colonel Parker when he reached headquarters, apologized for not being shaved, and when asked where his men were, he replied with a choke in his voice:

"Sir, they are out there where you put them."

It was the same Lieutenant Lockhart who afterwards confessed to his superior that during that fight in the trench, he was afraid, and ashamed lest his men might know that he was afraid. In the darkness, in the confusion and the hell, he lost touch with the platoon to his right. His orders were to keep in liaison—in touch—with the platoons on his right and left. Not knowing of course, what was happening in other parts of the trench except by what was happening to himself, he decided to carry out his orders and he crawled out of the trench, and, on his belly, made his way to the west to get in touch with the next platoon. Suddenly in the darkness, and with the roar of the fight around and overhead, he touched something alive. And in front of him in the flash of a shell, he saw a German apparently ready to shoot.

Then it was that he was afraid and for a moment his faculties were numb. He waited and waited for the German to fire and the German didn't fire. Then his courage returned and pulling his own pistol, he yelled, "Surrender!" There was no answer from the German and his nerves were almost at the breaking point when another flash lighted up the scene and revealed his opponent as a German, but a dead German.

He continued on and he found the bodies of ten dead Germans within a very short area. To show that there is no accurate method of knowing the German casualties in that battle, many hours later—the next morning—when the American swept over that same spot, beating the Hun back to his own lines, there were no bodies in that particular place.

In that trench, 150 boys were disarmed and captured by the Huns. But Major Hyatt told me a story of the grim determination of those lads which has never been told before in the United States. When the Germans were driven out of the Sybil trench the next morning, these prisoners were taken north through Remieres Woods under guard. Suddenly they turned upon their guards, beat them over the heads with their fists and with anything they could get hold of and made desperate attempts to escape. Some were bayoneted, some were shot down—a few escaped. Three times on that journey through the Remieres Woods, those 102nd Regiment boys fought their captors in their wild and desperate effort to break away and get back to the American line. And in each of the attempts some of them died.

Major Hyatt told me of Captain Bissell of the 102nd, who was one of the prisoners. He succeeded in escaping but while making his way back to the lines a shell exploded near him and he was hurled forty feet by the concussion. And when he got back to the lines he was sent to the hospital for shell shock and wounds.

When the Germans had cleaned out as they thought, all of the men in the Sybil trench, they started, still in the darkness, for the town of Seicheprey. Seicheprey is a little village which before the war had held some 150 to 200 inhabitants, with a few dozen buildings. On April 20, some of those buildings were still standing, and on April 21 none of them was standing. Across the open space between the trench in the rain and the fog and the mist in the darkness, charged the advancing German shock troops. On the right back of the town of Seicheprey, Major Rau, commanding the first line of reserves, had already organized a counter-attack, after hearing the noise of the conflict in the Sybil trench.

The German picked shock troops and the boys from Connecticut met in the center of the town. Rifles were abandoned except to be used as clubs, while hand grenades and bombs and knives did their deadly work in a hand to hand encounter. On either side of the town of Seicheprey itself the 102d machine gunners were playing their deadly hail into the advancing German ranks. No man who was in that fight in the town of Seicheprey any more than he who was in the Sybil trench will ever forget that hour which made Seicheprey famous.

The chosen troops of the Kaiser, chosen to teach the cannon-fodder from America that it knew nothing of war, remained in the town of Seicheprey not more than fifteen minutes on that black morning of April 20. And they were glad—mighty glad—to test their running powers back to the Sybil trench, which they had captured an hour before, and their hurry was such that they didn't even take their dead with them. It was a fight of man to man and although the Americans were outnumbered in Seicheprey they drove the Kaiser's best back in rout and disorder.

Major Hyatt told me of the cook of the Second Regiment who was in Seicheprey. One of the advancing Huns, armed with a flame thrower, threw his flame into the cook's kitchen where the cook was getting breakfast. Breakfast no longer had attractions for the cook, who,

grabbing a butcher knife from his block, rushed into the street and with yells of rage and triumph, joined in the hand-to-hand melee in which the Germans were fast getting the worst of it.

Beaten back from the town of Seicheprey, the Germans sought the safety of the Sybil trench, filled with American and German dead. Then the German artillery returned to the attack and all day long they poured all varieties of shells in anger and fury on the town of Seicheprey, on the ground between Seicheprey and the Sybil trench and on the areas back to and beyond Beaumont.

But the Americans were mad. The Connecticut boys had been struck and struck hard. There were reports that some of the boys in the Sybil trench and some of the prisoners had been mutilated by the Germans. They wanted revenge and they wanted it quick. So while the German artillery roared and chorused all day long, General Edwards and his staff were busy preparing for the counter-attack. And in the morning, under cover of their own barrage, the forces of the 26th Division, led by the Connecticut troops, filed down from the ridge behind Seicheprey and with a yell on their lips they struck the clear space between Seicheprey and the Sybil trench. There was one thought, and one thought only: they wanted revenge for the morning before and the whole of the Kaiser's army couldn't stop them.

The Germans in the Sybil trench used machine guns and rifles on the advancing Americans while the German artillery in the rear sprayed the ground with gas and high explosives. But there was no stopping this time. The American forces crossed the intervening mile and a quarter space and were upon the Germans occupying the old American trench. They took sweet revenge for the morning before, but the Germans didn't wait to be exterminated, as they would have been, for they fled out of the trench and across No Man's Land and beyond their own wire.

And thus the picked troops of Hunland, chosen to teach the American army its first great lesson, after twenty-six hours of fighting, were back where they came from, and out of thirty-five hundred German troops engaged, between twelve and fifteen hundred were wounded, while the American casualties were something over six hundred.

And Hindenberg had learned the lesson which he was to learn with greater force within the next succeeding months—that American soldiers couldn't be frightened, and couldn't be terrorized and that they could fight.

Both General Edwards and Major Hyatt speak in particular of the crew of one machine gun. They seem to believe that the story of that machine gun crew typifies the spirit of the American Army as it typifies the spirit of Connecticut. When the battle was over and when the Germans had been driven back to their own lines the Americans went out seeking their own dead and wounded and they found this particular gun crew. It was part of the 102d Machine Gun Battalion.

The gun was where it had stood in the fight. Across the body of the gun was draped the lifeless form of a Connecticut gunner. On the tripod and with his hands still on the trigger was another Connecticut

gunner, dead. The other members of the gun crew were on the ground beside the gun, dead. In front of the gun, for thirty yards, were piles of dead Germans. The crew had died where they fought, and the gun and the dead Germans were evidence that they had not lost the fight.

In the rain and the fog and the smoke and the gas of that frightful hour in the trench, there was a corporal. His name was not remembered by General Edwards nor Major Hyatt. He was in charge of a number of men and directing their fire. He was unable to see from the position which he occupied and he climbed out, in the murk, and climbed upon a tree stump where he was a target for everything of destruction that night, and from that point of vantage he directed his men.

Or the story of the two boys who were chosen to carry a message to Regimental Headquarters. It is the custom under such circumstances, in the dark to run Indian file, with the hand of one upon the shoulder or coat of the other in order not to lose touch. These two boys started for Regimental Headquarters and before they had gone many yards the boy in front was struck down, killed. And the other boy, reaching into the pocket of his companion, took the message from his pocket and in the darkness he went on, somehow, escaping in a place in which escape was a miracle and reached headquarters with the message.

Major Hyatt told me that in the first part of that fight the fire of the artillery was such that almost every man who attempted to carry a message to the rear, not only from the Sybil trench, but from the reserve trench on the right south of Seicheprey, was killed in the attempt.

When the casualties were figured out by General Edwards and his staff it was found that eighty men of the 102d had been killed, a hundred and fifty taken prisoners and about four hundred were wounded and gassed. The gas casualties, many of them, were caused during the day when the Germans drenched the rear areas with their shells.

On April 21 the Americans buried one hundred and sixty-five dead Germans, and it is known that many German dead bodies were carried away by the Huns in their retreat. From the prisoners taken later, General Edwards says that he is certain the German casualties of the day were between twelve and fifteen hundred men. Thus, although the German troops were superior in numbers, and although they outgunned the American artillery two to one, their casualties were double the number of the American casualties.

The Americans captured in the battle eleven machine guns, a large quantity of ammunition, telephones which the Germans had brought along with them for field service, and quite a large amount of other supplies. The 102d lost only one machine gun and four or five machine guns were rendered useless.

The Americans took just one prisoner that day. That seems strange and an unspoken query was met by a grim and forceful statement from General Edwards: "You know," he said, "stories reached us that day that some of the Connecticut boys in the trench and some of the prisoners, had been mutilated by the Germans. I was never

able to confirm any of such stories which were reported to me, but the stories persisted and the boys believed them. Perhaps that is the reason why the 102d did not take prisoners."

To get some idea of the ground which the 26th Division was compelled to cover when it took over the Seicheprey section, General Edwards said that his front extended for 18 and a half kilometers, between 11 and 12 miles. That means that of the entire division there would be less than twenty-five hundred men to a mile, and as only about a seventh of the men were in the front line trenches, it would mean that three hundred and fifty men would be called upon the front line trench to cover a distance of nearly a mile. That gives some idea of the thinness of the line which the Germans struck on that morning of April 20.

He told me of the topographical layout of the ground in front of Seicheprey and Richecourt, which was to the northwest of Seicheprey and of the American trench, and was the first town beyond the American line held by the Germans. That was the town from which half of the Germon troops advanced on the morning of April 20. On the right, to the northeast, was Remieres Woods and on the left of that and to the north was the famous Apremont or Bois Breuilles, which was later made famous in the advance along the Meuse. Between Apremont and the Bois Breuilles is the valley of the Vir, which is nothing but a marsh. It was through the ravine bordering that marsh that the Germans troops came from Remieres Woods when they turned the flank of the Sybil trench. Across No Man's Land, directly in front of the Sybil trench was open ground with the German wire, the German first line trench and the system of supporting trenches. Richecourt had been badly battered in the many attacks in that sector.

General Edwards, in speaking of the work of the 102d Regiment, said: "If I were put on oath as to which was the first and best of my regiments I could not say, because each had its own special line of endeavor and achievement which was not equalled by the work of another in that particular line. The record in the war has been such that all of them did gloriously. But I will say this, and I say it without fear of contradiction, that no regiment in the whole American Expeditionary Force had a better record than the 102d.

"In the battle of Seicheprey these young lads were led by platoons, by their lieutenants. The captains were in the rear of their companies, and in that battle in which they received their introduction to the World War, and in all the other battles in which they took part, not a man quailed, no matter what the situation was. They stood up to their duty and even in the thickest of the fight, when the odds seemed to be death or capture, not one of them asked to be relieved and none of them would be relieved, until the order came from the commanding officers."

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